

**An Archaeological Survey of
Tres Laurels Development,
Western Bexar County, Texas**

by

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**Submitted to
JR Realty Corp., Dallas. Texas**

**Report No. 70
Abasolo Archaeological Consultants
San Antonio, Texas
2008**

Abstract

Abasolo Archaeological Consultants conducted an archeological survey of the 40+ acres of property bordering Potranco Creek in the Tres Laurels Development for JR Realty Corp., Dallas, Texas and the City of San Antonio. The survey was conducted in order to determine if any cultural resources were to be affected by the development and to assess the significance of such resources regarding possible nomination to National Register of Historic Places. The assessment consisted of a surface inspection only. Evidence of a former ranch house and outbuildings (all razed) and a long concrete trough was seen, but none of these features are of historic significance. No archaeological or historic properties were observed on the property. No further archaeological work is recommended.

Introduction and Background

Abasolo Archaeological Consultants conducted an archeological survey of the 40+ acres of property bordering Potranco Creek in the Tres Laurels Development for JR Realty Corp., Dallas, Texas and the City of San Antonio. The survey was conducted in order to determine if any cultural resources were to be affected by the development and to assess the significance of such resources regarding possible nomination to National Register of Historic Places. Field work was carried out by Harry Shafer and Thomas Hester in December, 2007 and in April, 2008. The assessment consisted of a surface inspection only.

The project area is adjacent to Potranco Creek, a tributary drainage of the Medina River. Previous archaeological investigations in the Potranco Creek valley (Shafer and Hester 2006) has shown that prehistoric archaeological sites do occur, although infrequently, along this drainage system. The survey concentrated on areas of the Tres Laurels property that were considered to have a moderate to high probability of containing prehistoric cultural deposits. An unusually dense growth of giant ragweed hampered the field inspection in the fall of 2007 with regards to a 100% walkover. The area was again inspected in December and in April of 2008; enough landscape was open, however, to determine the presence or absence of archaeological evidence.

The Setting

The Tres Laurels (Laurels Ranch) development is located in western Bexar County, on the west side of Grossenbacher Road and north of Highway 90. About 40 acres are scheduled for housing construction. There is considerable topographic relief, from the uplands or ridge on the east side, dropping down to the Potranco Creek floodplain on the west. The creek bed is essentially dry, except at times of heavy rain. There is a riparian zone that includes oak, hackberry, cedar elm and mesquite. Of course, the landscape has little of its native vegetation, but the creek side tree species were typical of "bottomland" areas in this part of Bexar County in the 1830s-1850s (Wills 2005). Evidence of agricultural pursuits (such as the terraces overlooking the creek), including cattle-raising (concrete troughs) are scattered around the tract, along with the remnants of a 20th century residence. None of the features or structures observed during our survey warrant any further historical research.

The geology of western Bexar County (Arnold 1959), south of the Balcones Escarpment, is marked by a series of adjacent faults of Cretaceous age. Geologic units associated with the Tres Laurels project region include the Taylor marl (calcareous clays) and the Austin chalk (chalky limestone).

The major soil type is found in the higher elevations consists of the Tarrant association (TaC; 5 to 15% slopes). These are dark colored soils but are very shallow and contain gravel, cobbles (including chert [flint], and even flagstones. On the Tres Laurels tract, this soil extends down to the creek. However, adjoining it on the upstream side (north;

outside the survey area), BpC. where a small drainage to Potranco Creek has been dammed to form a stock tank, Brackett clay loam (BpC; 1-5% slopes) soils are present; the soil is fairly shallow and is mostly a silty clay. The former residence in the project is on Brackett soils (BrD, 5-12 percent slopes), typical of meandering ridges and upland slopes. All soils data are derived from Taylor et al. (1991).

Archaeological Background

Regional Culture History

There are now over 1700 recorded sites in Bexar County. These reflect a cultural chronology spanning 11,000 years of prehistory and a historic era that left many important structures. Archaeologists have divided this broad range of time into four general periods: Paleoindian, Archaic, Late Prehistoric, and Historic (see Hester 2004; Turner and Hester 1993). Comprehensive statements on the archaeology and historic archaeology of the Applewhite area to the south provide additional details on regional archaeology (McGraw and Hindes 1987).

The Paleoindian period, 9,200-6,800 B.C., has distinctive chipped stone spear points used in hunting mammoth and other late Ice Age mammals early in the period. Other spear types appear with a shift to bison, deer and other game after the Ice Age ended around 8000 B.C. Known site types in Bexar County are *campsites* with flint-chipping debris from stone-tool making and repair. One site of Clovis age (9,200 B.C.) was excavated near FM1604 and Leon Creek. A later site, dating around 7,500 B.C., was investigated on the grounds of St. Mary's Hall on Salado Creek. To the south of the present project locale, an Angostura occupation (6800 B.C.) has been documented in the Applewhite Reservoir basin.

Sites of the following Archaic period are common across Bexar County. These peoples were hunters and gatherers as in the earlier Paleoindian period, but lived in an environment very similar to those of modern times. Projectile points used to tip spears (often erroneously called "arrowheads") change in shape through time, from 6,800 B.C. to 500 A.D. Archaeologists use these forms to recognize more specific time frames within the Archaic (e.g., Early, Middle and Late Archaic). In northern Bexar County, the most distinctive Archaic site is the *burned rock midden* (large accumulations of fire-cracked limestone result from the use of earth-oven cooking starting around 3,000 B.C.). But in southern Bexar County, *open campsites* are found along creek and river terraces with large amounts of flint debris from tool-making; sometimes, animal bone (dietary remains) and charcoal that can be used for radiocarbon dating. Other Archaic site types include *lithic procurement areas* (in northern Bexar County, where flint cobbles eroded out of the Edwards limestone and were processed, and in southern Bexar County, exposures of hilltop Uvalde Gravels), *lithic scatters* (lightly-used areas probably representing short-term hunting and gathering activities), *cemeteries* and rarely, *sinkhole burials* (Archaic peoples often disposed of their dead by placing them in sinkholes and caverns).

By 700 A.D., there began to be some changes in the long hunter-gatherer lifeway. The **Late Prehistoric** is first seen with the introduction of the bow and arrow. The stone arrow points are very small (mistakenly called “bird points”), but could be used in hunting game of any size. By 1300 A.D., the economy emphasized buffalo-hunting. Most sites of this era include *campsites*, often in areas previously used by Archaic peoples, *lithic scatters* of this age; and the *lithic procurement areas* of earlier times continued to be used.

During the Historic period, the best known archaeological remains are *ranch and farm houses of cut stone*, dating from the 1840s through the 1880s (see McGraw and Hinder 1987; they also recorded Spanish Colonial structures in the Medina River drainage to the south). Stacked- stone fences also occur. Such sites, including those without surviving structures, are recognized from 19th century pottery fragments, artifacts of glass and metal, etc. Later Historic houses and farmsteads, through the early 1900s, are also found.

Sites in Project Vicinity

An overview of Potranco Creek archaeology is found in Shafer and Hester (2006), based on their survey of the 2,000-acre Redbird Ranch, 4-5 miles northwest of Tres Laurels. In addition, the Tres Laurels tract is less than three miles west of the CMH Fieldstone tract on FM1604. The report by Hester and Shafer (2006) provides additional details of the archaeology of this particular area.

McGraw (1977) published a site survey of Medio Creek to the east, roughly paralleling lower Potranco Creek... Previous archaeological work has documented seven archaeological sites within the project area. Most of these (41BX1397-1403) are upland chipped stone procurement sites overlooking Potranco Creek (Texas Archeological Site Atlas, Texas Historical Commission). Two of the previously recorded sites are historic, 41BX1401 (a farm/ranch complex) and 41BX1601 (a rock retaining wall).

Site 41BX1428 is a burned rock midden located along Potranco Creek, upstream from the Tres Laurels tract. This site provides an indication that intact deposits might be expected in the deeper soils along the creek within the survey area and has yielded diagnostic artifacts ranging in age from 2000 B.C. to 900 A.D. (Nickels et al., 2003).

Much of western Bexar County had been settled by the 1850s, with agriculture and livestock as the primary economy. Historic sites in the area include board and batten houses from the 1890s (Shafer and Hester 2006), as seen at Redbird Ranch to the north. Earlier farm and ranch complexes have not yet been recorded in the project vicinity.

Field Investigations

As noted previously the field investigations were hampered in the fall of 2007 by the dense stands of giant ragweed that resulted from the unusually wet late spring and summer of 2007. There were avenues of open landscape that allowed for adequate property inspection to insure that no archaeological sites were missed.

The upland portion of the property has been badly disturbed by farm/ranch operations. Previous use of the property was indicated by the recent historic features and landscape patterns. The former residence, garage, barns, pens and other outbuildings were once in the northeastern portion, while the southeastern portion was used as a pasture. The western portion of the property was used for cultivation (see Fig. 2). Furthermore, a sewer line has been installed along the north side of Potranco Creek (Fig. 6)

Concrete slabs and discarded appliances and other junk were noted on top of the hill as evidence of a former house and outbuildings. Traces of barns and pens were also seen nearby (see Figure 2). The southeast section of the property also had been used as a cattle pasture. Terracing to restrain erosion can be seen in the southwest portion of the property (Fig. 2.); this terracing also has seriously disturbed the upper deposits. The property is divided by a fence and a long concrete trough or feed bunk that runs east-west from near the hill crest to the upper slope (Fig. 6 and 7). This feed bunk has a metal post fence set into the north wall and a scored concrete apron on the north side. The south side borders a maintenance road that allowed for feed to be off-loaded into the trough. Similar features were seen in a feed lot on Seco Creek in Medina County by Hester (Fig. 8, 9).

The field inspection failed to find any evidence of a prehistoric archaeological site and the historic features are recent in age.

Summary and Recommendations

The pedestrian survey of the Tres Laurels Development west of Grosenbacher Road failed to identify any evidence of a prehistoric site or historic property. A house and outbuildings once stood on the hill overlooking the Potranco Creek valley to the west, but this entire complex had been removed by the time of the survey. Evidence of ranching facilities was apparent in the form of barn foundations and a concrete feed bunk but none are considered to be of historic significance. No further archaeological work is recommended for Tres Laurels Development.

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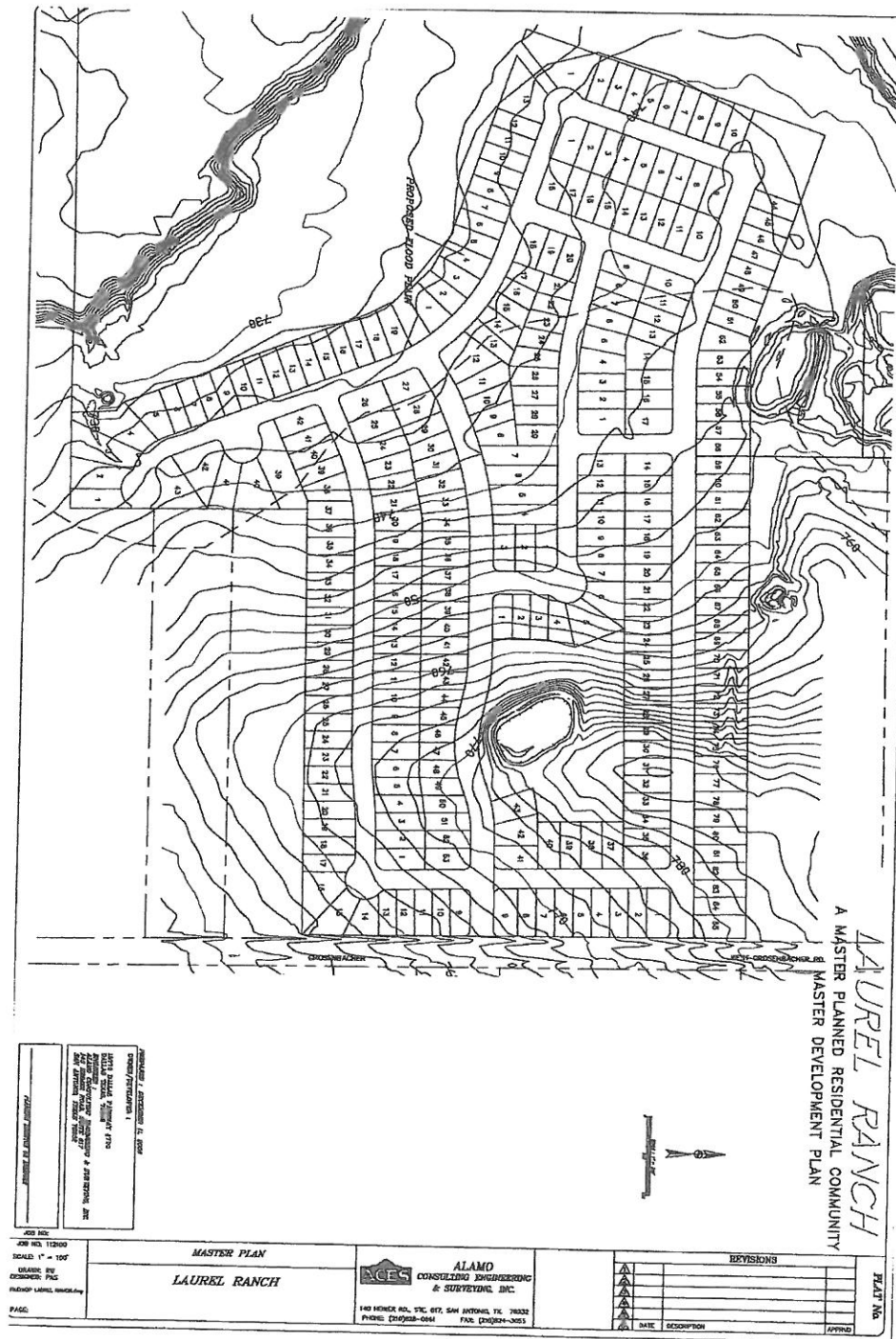
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Figures



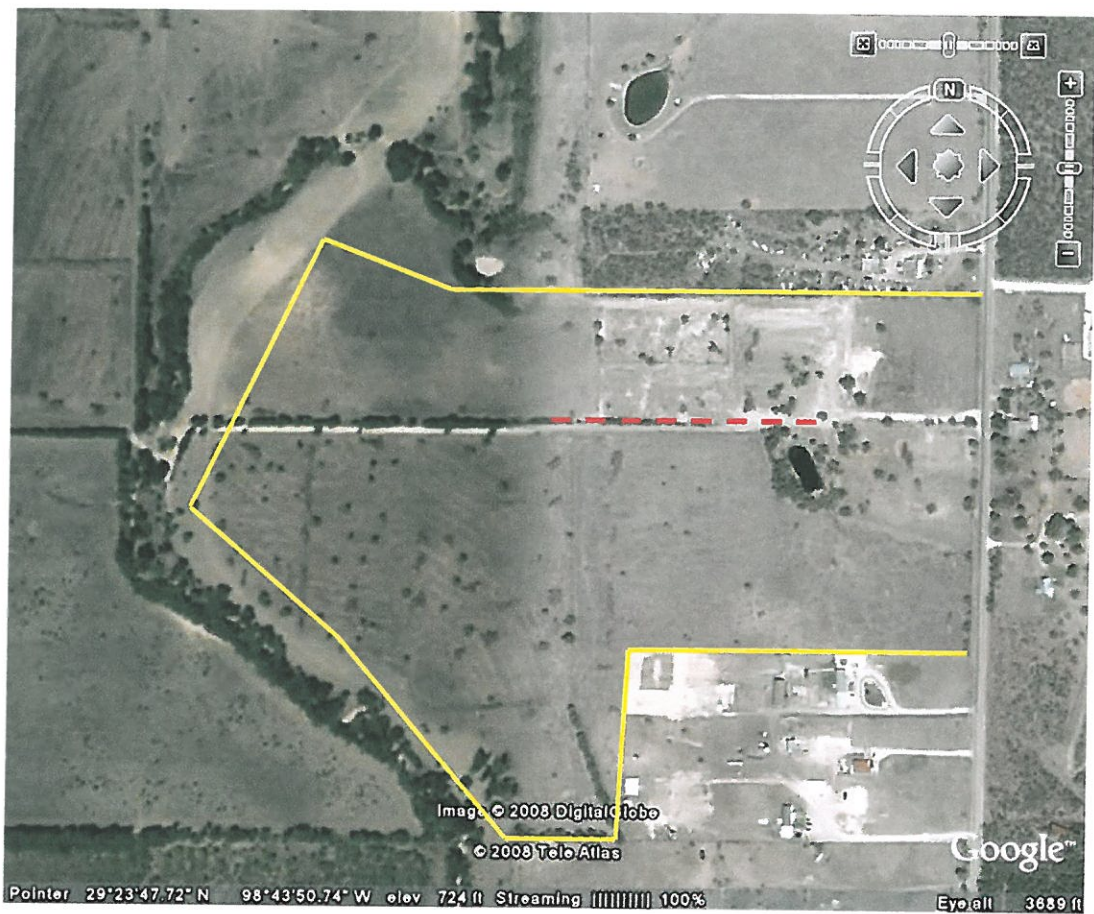


Figure 2. Google Earth image showing the approximate boundaries of the Tres Laurels development. The red line marks the concrete trough. Also, note the terracing in the southwest portion of the property.



Figure 3. The ragweed “forest” that covered the fallow fields and pastures on the property in the fall of 2007.



Figure 4. East-west transect along the fence line that divides the north and south portions of the property.



Figure 5. Field conditions in April of 2008.



Figure 6. View along the western margin of the Tres Laurels property showing the open floodplain and sewer installation.



Figure 6. The concrete trough feed bunk feature.

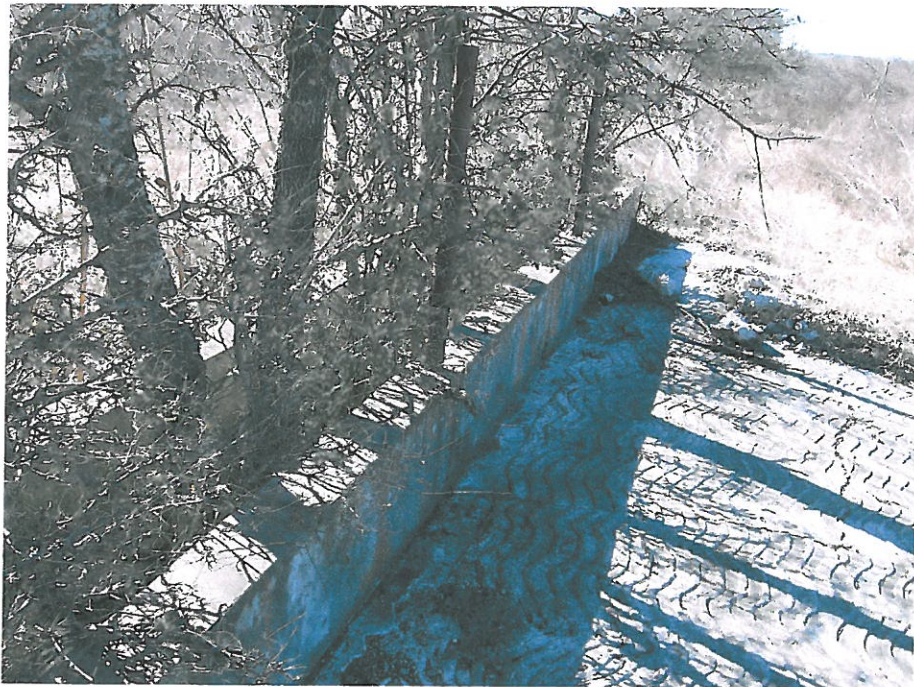


Figure 7. The western and terminal end of the feed bunk. The scored apron can be seen adjoining the trough feature and fence.



Figure 8. Feed bunk along Seco Creek in Medina County observed by Thomas Hester. Note gravel apron rather than a concrete apron.



Figure 9. Feed trough along Seco Creek in Median County observed by Thomas Hester. Note gravel apron rather than a concrete apron.